

Message Text

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ACTION OES-07

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UNCLAS SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 2262

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SUMMARY: THE RATE OF DEFORESTATION IN THAILAND IS ACCELERATING AND FAR OUTSTRIPS BELATED GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO CONTROL IT. LESS THAN 39 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL LAND AREA REMAINS IN FORESTS; AT THE PRESENT RATE, THIS WILL DROP TO 17 PERCENT BY 1981 AND EFFECTIVELY TO ZERO BY THE END OF THE DECADE. PRESENT GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS TO PREVENT THIS DISASTER ARE INEFFECTIVE AND ARE ONLY FORESTALLING COMPLETE DEFORESTATION. AGRICULTURAL LAND EXPANDED BY 20 PERCENT FROM 1971 TO 1975, AT THE EXPENSE OF THE FORESTS, BUT PROBLEMS OF WATER CONTROL REMAIN MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN SIMPLY LAND AVAILABILITY. ONLY 5.6 MILLION HECTARE OF LAND IS IRRIGATED OR IRRIGABLE AND ONLY 12 PERCENT OF THIS LAND IS IN THE NORTHEAST, THE REGION MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO DROUGHT AND FLOODING. HIGH COSTS OF IRRIGATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION PRECLUDE RAPID DISSEMINATION OF MORE MODERN SERVICES AND FACILITIES TO THE MAJORITY OF THAI FARMERS.
END SUMMARY.
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1. ONE OF THE MORE SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS FACING THAILAND NOW AND IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE IS THE EXCESSIVE RATE OF DEFORESTATION. DR. BUNSONG LEKAGUL, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE THAI ASSOCIATION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE AND MEMBER OF GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED FOREST CONSERVATION COMMITTEES, CITES OFFICIAL AND PRIVATE STATISTICS AND ASSESSMENTS

WHICH PROVIDE A PARTICULARLY BLEAK PROGNOSIS FOR THE REMAINING THAI FORESTS. BASED ON SATELLITE IMAGERY FROM THE EARTH RESOURCES TECHNOLOGY SATELLITE, ERTS-1, IN 1973, IT WAS REPORTED THAT THE AREA OF FOREST IN THAILAND TOTALLED 20,074,900 HECTARE OR 39 PERCENT OF THE COUNTRY. AN EARLIER STUDY (1970) DEMONSTRATED THAT THE ANNUAL CONSUMPTION OF WOOD AND WOOD PRODUCTS IN THAILAND AVERAGED 63.5 MILLION CUBIC METERS (MCM), OF WHICH 12.0 MCM WAS SAWNWOOD, 1.5 MCM POLES, AND 50.0 MCM FUELWOOD REQUIREMENTS. A SURVEY OF THAI FORESTS DETERMINED THAT 881,944 HECTARE OF FOREST WAS REQUIRED TO SATISFY SUCH NEEDS WITH AN ADDITIONAL 255,000 HECTARE OF FOREST ALSO LOST ANNUALLY FOR SHIFTING CULTIVATION, OR A TOTAL OF 1,136,944 HECTARE OF FOREST CLEARED IN 1970. ASSUMING THAT THE RATE OF CONSUMPTION WILL INCREASE IN PROPORTION TO THE RATE OF POPULATION GROWTH, OR 2.55 PERCENT PER YEAR, IT IS ESTIMATED THAT THERE WILL REMAIN LESS THAN 9 MILLION HECTARE OF FOREST IN THAILAND IN 1981, OR 17 PERCENT OF THE COUNTRY, AND BY 1987 THE ENTIRE FOREST AREA OF THAILAND WILL BE EFFECTIVELY CLEARED.

2. THE ROYAL THAI GOVERNMENT HAS BELATEDLY RECOGNIZED THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE DEFORESTATION PROBLEM AND HAS ENACTED MEASURES TO CONTROL IT. THERE IS ALREADY AN ESTABLISHED SYSTEM OF NATIONAL PARKS AND GAME PRESERVES WHICH COVERS 2,258,800 HECTARE OR 4.39 PERCENT OF THE UNCLASSIFIED

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COUNTRY. IN ADDITION, ALL AREAS ABOVE 600 METERS ELEVATION ARE PROTECTED BY LAW AGAINST ANY LOGGING OR CLEARING FOR CULTIVATION. THESE LAWS ARE NOT ENFORCED AND HOLD LITTLE RELEVANCE FOR THE HILLTRIBES SYSTEM OF SHIFTING CULTIVATION. THE GOVERNMENT REFORESTATION PROGRAM CLAIMS SOME SUCCESS TO DATE. 94,000 HECTARE OF NEW FOREST HAVE BEEN REPLANTED IN THE TEN YEARS ENDING 1976. PLANS CALL FOR AN ADDITIONAL 320,000 HECTARE OF FOREST TO BE REPLANTED EACH YEAR OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. WHILE THIS TARGET FALLS FAR SHORT OF THE YEARLY RATE OF DEFORESTATION AND IS FAR BEYOND THE PRESENT RATE OF REFORESTATION, IT DOES REPRESENT AN INCREASING OFFICIAL AWARENESS OF THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE PROBLEM. HOWEVER, DESPITE ALL EFFORTS TO PRESERVE THE REMAINING FORESTS AND TO REPLANT THOSE ALREADY CLEARED, ILLEGAL LOG

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POACHING, AND SUBSEQUENT ILLEGAL CULTIVATION OF FORESTS.
A VERY ROUGH ESTIMATE OF THE COST TO A LOG POACHER TO
CLEAR A SINGLE HECTARE OF FOREST WITH MODERN EQUIPMENT
IS \$600. SQUATTERS MOVING IN TO THE CLEARED AREA CAN
CULTIVATE THE LAND FOR ONE TO TWO YEARS BUT BY THE THIRD
YEAR IT HAS BEEN TAKEN OVER BY IMPERATA AND PENISETUM
GRASS, PEST GRASS, WHICH EFFECTIVELY PREVENTS FURTHER
CULTIVATION. THE PEST GRASSES ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE
TO FIRE IN THE DRY SEASONS AND FREQUENT GRASS FIRES
DESTROY AND CHANCE FOR NATURAL REFORESTATION OF THE AREA.
THE RESULT IS THAT WITHOUT SOME ASSISTANCE BY MAN, IN
THAILAND, NATURE ITSELF CANNOT ARREST OR REVERSE THE
DESTRUCTION OF THE FOREST ONCE BEGUN BY THE PERPETRATOR,
MAN HIMSELF. PRESENT GOVERNMENT REFORESTATION PROGRAMS
DO NOT BALANCE THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT REFORESTATION PROGRAMS
DO NOT BALANCE THE PRESENT RATE OF DEFORESTATION AND
EVEN THE MOST OPTIMISTIC ESTIMATES OF THE RATE OF
DESTRUCTION OFFER NO HOPE OF SIGNIFICANT FOREST STANDS
IN THAILAND BEYOND 1993.

3. ALTHOUGH BY GENERAL CONSENSUS, IT IS AGREED THAT
AGRICULTURAL LAND IS BEING LOST TO CULTIVATION THROUGH
PROBLEMS RELATING GENERALLY TO WATER CONTROL, THE
DIRECT CORRELATION HAS NOT BEEN QUANTIFIED TO DATE BY
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THE RTG. A STUDY COMPLETED BY THE MINISTRY OF
AGRICULTURE AND AGRICULTURE COOPERATIVES (MAAC) IN
1972 REVEALS THAT OF THE TOTAL AREA OF LAND IN
THAILAND, 51.4 MILLION HECTARE, ONLY ABOUT 29.7 MILLION
HECTARE IS SUITABLE FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION. A LATER
STUDY, IN 1975, REVEALED THAT FROM 1971 TO 1975 THE

LAND AREA DEVOTED TO FARM HOLDINGS HAD INCREASED FROM 15.5 MILLION HECTARE TO 18.6 MILLION HECTARE, OR BY ABOUT 20 PERCENT, AND THAT MOST OF THIS EXPANSION WAS AT THE EXPENSE OF FORESTED AREAS. DURING THE SAME PERIOD, THE MAAC AND OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES NOTED INCREASING PROBLEMS OF ALTERNATE FLOODING AND DROUGHT IN THE NORTH AND NORTHEAST, REGIONS MOST SERIOUSLY DENUDED OF THEIR PAST EXTENSIVE AND PROTECTIVE FOREST AREAS. CONTROLLED WATER AVAILABILITY IS A PROBLEM AT LEAST AS SIGNIFICANT IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AS LAND SCARCITY AND THE MAAC ESTIMATES "IRRIGABLE LAND" AT ABOUT 3.2 MILLION HECTARE AND "IRRIGATED LAND" AT ABOUT 2.4 MILLION HECTARE, ALTHOUGH IRRIGATION IS PRIMARILY SUPPLEMENTAL DURING AN ADEQUATE RAINY SEASON. LESS THAN A THIRD OF A MILLION HECTARE REPRESENTS AREA WITH ADEQUATE WATER CONTROL TO PERMIT DOUBLE CROPPING. IT IS OF INTEREST TO NOTE THAT THE NORTHEAST REGION. THE REGION IN WHICH VIRTUAL TOTAL DEFORESTATION HAS BEEN ACHIEVED, CONTAINS ONLY 12 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL IRRIGABLE LAND.

4. GIVEN THE CLOSE CORRELATION WHICH EXISTS BETWEEN CONTROLLED MOISTURE AVAILABILITY, CROP YIELDS, AND RETURN ON INVESTMENTS IN PURCHASED INPUTS, IT IS QUITE UNDERSTANDABLE THAT THE POOREST FARMERS ARE FOUND IN THOSE AREAS WITH LIMITED IRRIGATION FACILITIES AND UNPREDICTABLE RAINFALL DISTRIBUTION PATTERNS. THESE
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ARE ALSO THE GROUPS FACING THE GREATEST RISKS IN TERMS OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, AND THEY ARE THUS PRONE TO FOLLOW LOW-YIELD, LOW-RISK, TRADITIONAL METHODS OF PRODUCTION. THE HIGH COSTS OF IRRIGATION HAVE PRECLUDED SUFFICIENTLY LARGE SCALE PROJECTS THAT MIGHT BENEFIT SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF POOR FARMERS AND WITHOUT ADEQUATE TECHNOLOGY ADAPTED TO THE PREVAILING RAIN-FED CONDITIONS OF THE MAJORITY OF THAI FARMERS LITTLE RELIEF CAN BE EXPECTED IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.
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